

VZCZCXRO6295

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RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 050738Z JAN 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5492
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000008

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: A STIFF LUKASHENKO SENDS A MELANCHOLIC NEW YEAR'S MESSAGE

REF: MINSK 003

MINSK 00000008 001.2 OF 002

Summary

1. (SBU) An exhausted-looking Lukashenko on December 31 delivered his yearly New Year's address to Belarusians before the stroke of midnight. Standing stiffly next to a fireplace mantle and eyes noticeably shifting to the teleprompter behind the camera, Lukashenko slowly, without his infamous "charisma" or emotional outbursts, gave a politically charged New Year's greetings. The president lamented the pressures Belarus faces from the West and countries that were supposed to be friends [i.e., Russia]. He warned listeners that the road to prosperity would be rough, but lauded Belarus' 2006 economic accomplishments and predicted that the country would accomplish more in 2007. End summary.

Bread Does Not Come Easy

2. (U) Lukashenko said that the New Year brought sadness and happiness. Sadness because precious days of our lives are behind us, and happiness because the future holds new hope and expectations. However, "bread did not come easy" for Belarusians in 2006 and the same could be expected for 2007. According to Lukashenko, 2006 was a "tense" and "complicated" year for Belarus. Although Belarus wanted to focus on the economy and social welfare, outside and inside forces exerted massive internal and external pressure during the presidential elections. However, efforts to "rock" the country failed, because the "wise" Belarusian people voiced their choice clearly and with resolve.

How Could Our Friends [Russia] Do This!

3. (U) The president noted that "once again" Belarus was threatened with economic sanctions and isolation, because other countries did not want Belarus to become fully independent and self-sufficient. Pressure from Western countries was no surprise, but anti-Belarusian attitudes among friends of Belarus [i.e., Russia] raised concern. Belarus' "friends" violated earlier agreements made with Belarus, striking a serious blow to their "age-old" friendship with Belarus. Lukashenko warned that Belarus' policies of a peaceful world outlook, sovereignty, and social welfare would not be sacrificed in the face of threats and pressure. According to the president, it was obvious that "friendly" neighbors had forgotten the old Russian saying "God is not in power, but in the truth."

New Years a Good Time To Discuss Five-Year Plans and GDP

¶4. (U) Lukashenko reassured his listeners that 2006 was a successful year, because Belarus met its economic, social, and cultural goals, fulfilled the "intensive" missions of the first year of the new five-year plan, and increased reserves for the future. Gross domestic product growth doubled that of the world average and Belarus expanded its geopolitical ties in all continents, becoming a vanguard in the international wars on trafficking in persons and drugs, and other crimes.

No One Can Protect Us But Ourselves

¶5. (U) Lukashenko noted the lessons learned in 2006, primarily that no one but Belarusians cares for the welfare of the Belarusian government and people. The country's welfare depends on Belarusian's hard work, cultural activeness, unity, and willingness to love and protect the Fatherland. Belarusians must value peace and stability and have faith in the future; things other governments can only dream about. Belarusians must stand up for the nation's interest just as their ancestors did during tough times in history.

No Roses On Belarus' Path

¶6. (U) The president admitted that his speech may not be in the holiday spirit, but he was "used" to speaking "openly" and "honestly" to the people. He warned that a thorny and complex path, not one "draped in roses" lay ahead of Belarus. Belarusians must be prepared to make extraordinary and complicated decisions in order to stave off those who wish to receive "tasty morsels" of Belarusian property for free using economic and political tools. In order to make Belarus a strong and flourishing nation, citizens must rely only on themselves, their hands, intelligence, and persistence. "Wealth does not fall from the Heavens."

¶7. (U) Lukashenko explained that economic conditions must correlate

MINSK 00000008 002.3 OF 002

with reality. Belarusians have to live and work with zeal and caution and develop the new "economic knowledge" that includes modern technology and large efficient production. New economic conditions would strengthen Belarus' sovereignty and preserve Belarusians' comfortable, clean and beautiful country for the future generations.

Do Not Buck the System

¶8. (U) Lukashenko warned Belarusians not to allow dissent, disorder, and confusion to flourish in the country. "Destroyed is that home and killed is that government which is splintered from the inside." According to the president, Belarus' strength comes from unity, agreement, and each citizen's desire to aid in the country's development. Belarusians can be sure that their government will do everything to provide them a suitable life.

Birth Rates A Sign

¶9. (U) Lukashenko predicted that 2007 would be a good year because 2006 witnessed an increase in birth rates, the first such increase in a decade. This indicated that Belarusian women were confident in Belarus' future.

Finally, New Year's Wishes

¶10. (U) Finally, Lukashenko wished Belarusians all the happiness, good health, energy and success that life can offer. He wished for the New Year to fill each house with children's laughter and wealth and asked Belarusians to take care of their family and friends and show each other happiness, kindness, and love.

Past Happy New Year's Addresses Not So Happy

¶11. (U) Lukashenko's past New Year's addresses have always been filled with strong political statements and quirky phrases. Below are examples:

1996: "We will create a democratic, social oriented government, perfect the economy and spiritual sphere in order to satisfy the material and cultural needs of the citizen."

1997: "Belarusian territory did not turn into an arena of conflict and fights. A decisive step was taken towards stability, tranquility, and continuing democracy and away from anarchy and chaos."

1999: ". a year of strengthening and developing the integration processes.[and] coming together of two brotherly peoples [Belarusians and Russians]."

2000: "This year was a difficult one for our country, especially for agriculture. But the peasants stood their ground! We bow to you for saving the harvest."

2001: ". social-economic stability in society is considered by our foreign partners as a great accomplishment."

2002: "This year we built new metro stations, modernized the Berezovskiy hydroelectric station, extended gas lines to Polyessa, Minshin, and homes of Chernobyl victims."

2004: "We completed gas lines to Polyessa. In a few years we fulfilled promises that the Soviet Union made 30 years ago."

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Lukashenko's tired appearance is probably attributed to the then-ongoing gas negotiations with Russia that ended two minutes before the New Year (reftel). His indirect references to Russia highlighted his anger and signaled what has recently been an obvious change in GOB relations with the "brotherly" nation. Although melancholic compared to the holiday greetings from Russian President Putin an hour before, the content of Lukashenko's address surprised few of his listeners.

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